

2013

Dogs of War: The Biopolitics of Loving and Leaving the U.S. Canine Forces in Vietnam

Ryan Hediger
Kent State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj>

Recommended Citation

Hediger, Ryan, Dogs of War: The Biopolitics of Loving and Leaving the U.S. Canine Forces in Vietnam, *Animal Studies Journal*, 2(1), 2013, 55-73.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol2/iss1/6>

Dogs of War: The Biopolitics of Loving and Leaving the U.S. Canine Forces in Vietnam

Abstract

This essay uses Michel Foucault's notion of biopower to explore how dogs were used by the United States military in the Vietnam wars to mitigate the territorial advantages of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army. Relying in particular on the account by U.S. soldier and dog handler John C. Burnam, the essay also shows agency to be situational: since the dogs' superior sensory abilities enabled them to help significantly the United States military, their presence complicates and at times reverses dogmatic ideas of human agency trumping other animals' agency. But the operation of contemporary biopower makes such categorical inversions flimsy and reversible: the dogs' status changed from heroes set for moments above human soldiers to mere machinery, pressed below even animals, in order to excuse official United States policy to leave the dogs in Vietnam. Thus, most of the 4,000 or so dogs used in conflict were abandoned in the war zone when the United States withdrew, leaving many of the dogs to become meat, to be eaten by the Vietnamese. Soldiers' love for their canine partners heightened the teams' effectiveness, but it also sharpened the soldiers' sense of loss, contradiction, and betrayal in the face of the dogs' abandonment, helping to inspire a legal change in U.S. policy regarding military dogs in 2000. This specific historical case is understood as characteristic of contemporary biopower's function more generally.

Dogs of War: The Biopolitics of Loving and Leaving the U.S. Canine Forces in Vietnam¹

Ryan Hediger

Kent State University, Tuscarawas

***Abstract:** This essay uses Michel Foucault's notion of biopower to explore how dogs were used by the United States military in the Vietnam wars to mitigate the territorial advantages of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army. Relying in particular on the account by U.S. soldier and dog handler John C. Burnam, the essay also shows agency to be situational: since the dogs' superior sensory abilities enabled them to help significantly the United States military, their presence complicates and at times reverses dogmatic ideas of human agency trumping other animals' agency. But the operation of contemporary biopower makes such categorical inversions flimsy and reversible: the dogs' status changed from heroes set for moments above human soldiers to mere machinery, pressed below even animals, in order to excuse official United States policy to leave the dogs in Vietnam. Thus, most of the 4,000 or so dogs used in conflict were abandoned in the war zone when the United States withdrew, leaving many of the dogs to become meat, to be eaten by the Vietnamese. Soldiers' love for their canine partners heightened the teams' effectiveness, but it also sharpened the soldiers' sense of loss, contradiction, and betrayal in the face of the dogs' abandonment, helping to inspire a legal change in U.S. policy regarding military dogs in 2000. This specific historical case is understood as characteristic of contemporary biopower's function more generally.*

***Keywords:** dogs, war dogs, Vietnam wars, place, space, biopower, biopolitics, Foucault, agency, love, emotions, John C. Burnam*

Little discussed in the history of the Vietnam wars is the presence of some 4,000 war dogs as part of the United States military. Mostly German shepherds, but also including some Labrador retrievers, these dogs were used to scent land mines and other traps, to note enemy troop presence and movement, to guard camps, and more. The dogs' success in these activities, as reported by John C. Burnam, one of the dog handlers in the war and author of a book on the topic, led the Viet Cong to put 'price tags on their [the dogs'] heads' (vi). Loved by their handlers and celebrated as heroes, the dogs were almost all abandoned by military order in the war zone as expendable equipment, to the outrage of their human teammates.

This essay explores that historical episode, applying Michel Foucault's notion of biopower to interpret Burnam's personal narrative of his time in Vietnam, *Dog Tags of Courage: The Turmoil of War and the Rewards of Companionship*. One goal is simply to elaborate the character of Burnam's experiences with the dogs, showing how a war scenario intensified the fickle reversibility, the fluidity, of the categories 'human,' 'animal,' and 'machine.' Entities from each of these categories shifted position regularly in the Vietnam wars, as in most wars. These drastic category fluctuations are part of the same general politics of war, of biopower, that designate an enemy who is often respected even as he or she is killed, and that designate a place on the one hand as highly particularised, with a specific geography, culture, history, and on the other hand as an abstract space, a mere stage for geopolitics. Thus, the dogs' category mobility signals the related tension between space and place in a geography of war. I further claim that understanding a particular conflict and individual narratives like Burnam's requires attention to the powerfully shaping contextual forces, understood here under the framework of biopower, and their frequently contradictory relationship to individual love and affection.

Foucault and Biopower

The tension between a particular individual and broad categories of identity – like the tension between space and place – is crucial to comprehending dogs in war. Thus, individual dogs can be involved in human wars in large part because of the systems that organise conflict, now often called the military-industrial complex, or perhaps the military-academic-industrial complex. These systems extend well beyond war, reaching through more ordinary social structures.

Michel Foucault describes such systems using his notion of biopower, which he defines usefully in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*. In one passage, Foucault underscores ‘an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of “biopower”’ (140). One of these methods, Stephen Thierman recognises, appears with the slaughterhouse, an institution especially germane here when we recall that the killing technology of the abattoir has been used on many millions of humans and countless nonhumans in and out of war.²

Foucault argues that biopolitics infiltrates life and ‘endeavors to administer, optimise, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations’ (137). He contrasts this system with that of the monarchy, the symbol of which, he writes, ‘was the sword.’ In monarchy, power ‘was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself’ (136). Monarchy and the social structure that accompanied it reinforced its status with the threat of death, of killing. But that power, embodied in the monarch her- or himself, did not reach through as much of life as biopower does. So, Foucault explains, we ‘might say that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death’ (138; Foucault’s italics). The emphasis in biopolitics shifts from threatening to managing life. Ironically, though, the new social structure that goes to great care to manage and produce certain kinds of living – Foucault’s fostering of life – also leads to the massive scale of recent conflicts. Foucault explains, ‘wars were never as bloody as they have been since the nineteenth century, and all things being equal, never before did regimes visit such holocausts on their own populations.’ Thus, as part of this new system of politics, ‘Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilised for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital’ (136-37).

Steven Pinker’s book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, however, raises questions about this characterisation of war as increasingly deadly. He argues that, in sum, human beings have become progressively *less* violent through time, amassing much data in support of his case. Still, the overall shape of Foucault’s historical changes seems clear enough. A key characteristic of Foucault’s account is paradox: life is both more rigorously organised and controlled under biopower, and more entirely threatened. This quality appears clearly in war, particularly regarding this essay’s focus on dogs in Vietnam, where their value was subject to radical

reversals. At one moment the dogs in Vietnam made observations that affected whole platoons; at another, later moment, they would be left behind as useless machinery. Human beings in the war effort were subjected to similar changes, without the final step of being deliberately, categorically, systematically abandoned after the war effort concluded (although one could argue that the Vietnamese fighting for the South alongside the U.S. were in a similar way abandoned by the U.S. that is not quite so literally true as for the U.S. war dogs).

Not only is the value of life subject to such changes in war, the exertion of agency also proves radically contingent and contextual. By ‘agency,’ I intend something like Eileen Crist’s notion of it: undertaking ‘actions [that] are experientially meaningful and actively authored’ (40).³ Dogs and soldiers perform actions in certain contexts that have tremendous consequences and win them acclaim. But agents in warfare depend upon an entire power structure – an armature of biopower – for their agency to appear. When that structure ceases to support them, those individuals can become almost entirely without agency. Consider not only the dogs abandoned in Vietnam, but human prisoners of war. In other words, the dogs’ agency in Vietnam is a clear example of biopower in effect. The dogs have both evolved and been selectively bred to possess characteristics useful to humans in war. But once their usefulness had passed, their status was entirely reversed and they were abandoned. Such contradictions can appear in any exercise of power; biopower simply tends to intensify them.

While Foucault is helpful to this essay’s concerns, before proceeding it should be acknowledged that his work tends to rely on the simplistic human/animal distinction that has been overwhelmingly criticised in animal studies. Nicole Shukin, in her book *Animal Capital*, is one critic who recognises this deficiency in Foucault. She proposes the term ‘zoopolitical’ instead of ‘biopolitical’ to correct this issue (6-14).

War, Space, and Place: Vietnam

The location of war, often referred to with the telling phrase the ‘theatre of combat,’ straddles the distinction between space and place (as described, for instance, by Philo & Wilbert 5). Soldiers are brought to the ‘theatre’ from afar and often regard the place tactically, especially at

first, seeing it as a venue in which to conduct a human drama with the highest possible stakes. For these foreigners, then, place is abstracted into a kind of space for geopolitical theatre. Conversely, in almost all conflicts the local partisans defend terrain that is decidedly a place to them, and they are often aware of its nuances. In accounts of the United States' participation in the Vietnam conflicts, the 'enemy' Viet Cong are described as knowing and using the features of the landscape to their advantage. While the residents of any territory can be expected to know the place better than invading forces, this problem was particularly pronounced in the Vietnam wars, since there were pro-North individuals throughout Vietnam, north and south. Historian Marilyn B. Young writing about this issue in *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* quotes a Vietnamese village chief: 'every family "has someone in the insurgent ranks. If one does not, then perhaps his wife, or her husband, or a neighbor has a relative fighting for the National Liberation Front"' (147). Young goes on to summarise the issue in this way: 'This is what American soldiers and civilian officials meant by a war without a front' (148). Amidst this complex war scenario operated the American war dogs, who mitigated some of the Viet Cong's advantages by adding information with a different regime of sensory abilities, from acute scenting to sharp hearing, made legible and useful by the powerful relationships between dogs and human handlers.

Burnam's narrative of his experience in Vietnam echoes these ideas of place at various moments. On his first combat mission, for example, he made the mistake of putting on aftershave. His team leader, scenting this fact, then 'ripped into' the green soldier, relying on familiar discourses of animality and gender: 'You can't go on patrol smelling like a whore. Charlie will smell you a mile away. Charlie has instincts like a fucking animal. He lives out here for crying out loud' (24). Not only does the team leader concede knowledge of place to the pro-North Vietnamese, that knowledge is improved by their 'animal' instincts, which in this context appear as a grudging compliment. The familiarity of this form of thinking can obscure its actual strangeness: in this moment, animality is understood as more powerful and more dangerous than ostensibly civilised humanity. Traditional hierarchies of civilised/savage and human/animal are inverted. That is, the ignorant U.S. soldier, smelling of familiar cultural products, will be found out by the less artificial, and implicitly less civilised, Vietnamese. It is not enough simply to label this view as racist.⁴ In fact, the team leader has identified, however crassly, practical issues in war: the importance of place knowledge and of acute sensory attention.

In another moment that turns upon place dynamics, Burnam's first combat injury occurs when he jumps out of a helicopter directly onto a 'punji stake,' a 'carved small bamboo spear which blended into the natural vegetation.' These stakes were dipped in 'human waste to add infection to the wound they made' (60). Such measures relied essentially upon the North Vietnamese's awareness of place to be effective; the stakes had to seem part of 'the natural vegetation.' Burnam later summarises this way: 'The Viet Cong were smarter than Americans at fighting this type of jungle warfare, because the bush was their natural turf. Most of us young teenage grunts had never traveled outside the United States, let alone seen a jungle.' He continues, 'I knew that the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] were masters of jungle warfare hit-and-run tactics long before I was born. We Americans were infants, still learning how to walk and talk our way through the jungle' (185). Burnam's account naturalises differences to some extent with word choices like 'natural turf,' differences that were more precisely due to cultural and technological differences regarding place. The American military poured enormous resources into the war effort, while the North Vietnamese, comparatively, could not. But as Young points out, early in the war the North Vietnamese learned that 'despite the apocalypse of American firepower, they might yet defeat the United States: by fighting at extremely close quarters . . . [they] could make American air and artillery support far less effective' (162). Using this strategy made their place knowledge even more important.

The strategic advantages of place awareness, Burnam explains, were directly challenged by the United States' use of the dogs. 'The VC,' he writes, 'adept at hiding invisibly under cover of neatly camouflaged positions and base camps, were exceptionally difficult to find or surprise.' Thus, 'Courageous, well-trained war dog teams were called on to counteract the success of the hit-and-run tactics of the enemy' (vi). The leader of the platoon Burnam joined explained that, in Burnam's paraphrasing, 'When a scout dog acclimates to working in the jungle, open terrain, woods, and dry and wet weather, his natural senses and instincts become unbelievably keen,' better than those of 'any foot soldier' (105). Burnam argues that this canine ability amounts to a reversal of conventional human/animal hierarchies: 'I learned that my scout dog is the real pointman, not me. It would be my job to translate his dog language into English, so I could convey to everyone else what the dog sensed.' Burnam then takes this account one step further: 'When Timber and I worked together, he was the one in charge' (115). To underscore the significance of these statements, it is worth recalling that being 'on point,' as these dog-and-

human teams often were in Vietnam, meant being at the front of the unit, most exposed to the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese. So in a very real way, as Burnam's narrative makes clear repeatedly, whole missions and platoons hung on the relationship between the human handler and the dog and especially upon the dog's sensory capacity. Janet M. Alger and Steven F. Alger, writing about dogs in Vietnam (and using several of the same sources as the present essay) note that the U.S. dog handlers 'were certain that the dogs, by warning them of booby traps and ambushes, had saved thousands of lives' (87).

Love in a Time of War

Such intense working relationships between these companion species – dog and human – produced very powerful emotional bonds.⁵ Although human functioning in war often depends on ignoring or even shutting down some ordinary emotional systems, not only of sympathy, but also of fear and even of anger, effective use of the dogs required sensitivity to them. As Burnam writes, 'My life depended on how effectively I read the dog's natural reactions and alerts to danger' (v). This idea is repeated again and again in the film *War Dogs: America's Forgotten Heroes*, for which Burnam was an advisor and in which he also appears. The dogs' utility, the soldiers' sense of homesickness, and the dehumanising realities of war, intensified the already very strong bonds present between dogs and people. The dogs were 'best friends' as well as killing tools. Burnam describes this paradox while watching other expert dog handlers: 'Everything they did appeared to be simple and smooth and showed the genuine love between the dogs and their handlers, even though these dogs were trained to be lethal weapons' (75).⁶ These sorts of paradoxes are further underscored by the fact that Burnam nearly died just to *see* his dog Clipper once more before leaving the war: he volunteered for a mission as a 'short-timer' in exchange for a brief trip back to the canine compound where Clipper was housed. Several of the essays collected in the book *Animals and War* similarly demonstrate that powerful bonds between humans and animals during war – dogs, horses, elephants, and more – are very common.⁷

The sympathy and even empathy between dogs and humans show in sharper relief *because* of these harsh conditions. For instance, in the middle of a violent firefight, Burnam considers how much his dog companion must be suffering because of the loud explosions (125).

Such moments reveal a more general logic of canine-human teams in war. In Burnam's explanation of his second decision to work with military dogs, he notes that the recruiters for dog handlers 'said that being a dog handler meant loving and caring for animals.' They were told if they 'didn't love animals,' they ought not 'consider handling a military war dog' (102). One must be 'loving and caring' to function well in this violent biopolitical regime.

The paradoxical upshot, then, is that love functions as a pragmatic tool in human-animal relationships in the Vietnam war zone: By its very nature, love is often not regarded as something with simple utility, yet here it is the handler's love for dogs that makes these teams better *tools* in the war unit. Wartime emotion is a potent force. In this way, human-animal relationships resemble human-to-human relationship in times of war, which also tend to be intensified, a reality which likewise results in more effective fighting units. In Foucault's notion of biopower, life and its qualities are intensified. Thus, biopower often harms and even kills in the name of care and order. Death, a kind of absolute disorder at the individual level, is accepted and even encouraged in service of ideas of order at larger scales, producing profound and searing contradictions. Such cases remind us that affection and compassion are not enough to advance the causes of soldiers, dogs, and other animals; attention must be paid to the larger framework in which affection is expressed.

The film *War Dogs* includes interviews with numerous dog handlers in Vietnam who attest to having their own lives and the lives of whole platoons saved by the superior sensory regimes of their dogs. The dogs could smell and hear the opposing troops, their traps, their ambushes, when the humans could not. And years later as these men recollect their intensely close bonds with the dogs, many of them cannot refrain from tears. Indeed, nearly every handler interviewed in the film submits to tears at least once, often as they remember moments when the presence of a dog saved their own or other American lives. The power of their emotions exceeds their control. Likewise, Burnam, notes, 'While writing this book, I often became tearful when I touched upon deeply-rooted emotions as I recalled vivid details about life, truth, death, and sheer bloody horror of the combat situations I'd encountered in Vietnam' (viii-ix). This general impression is corroborated at several stages in his narrative, as when, for example, his best friend in his first combat mission is badly injured and several members of his platoon are killed; Burnam gives way to tears as his more experienced team member tells him 'it was okay to cry' (52). In this last case, it becomes clear that the emotional charge felt between dog and

human is in fact not atypical of warfare more generally. Instead, this partnership reveals a deeper, often less-visible emotional element implicit in many dimensions of war. The contours of the dog/human relationship, in other words, map the extreme emotional terrain of war more broadly.

A biopolitical system cannot contain or control all such forces it puts to work, as Foucault also notes.⁸ We see, for instance, how the often buried emotions of soldiers can erupt with tragic consequences when they return home, in suicides, domestic violence, and so on. Likewise, even though the dogs were exceptionally well trained for their roles, recognition of their wild otherness is implicit in the fact that they would be muzzled in certain circumstances to guard against the hazard that they might attack other American dogs or dog handlers. The line between ostensible friends and enemies, in other words, could easily be crossed, much as the heavy artillery brought in by United States troops could be, and often was, reclaimed by the Viet Cong and turned on its original owners. These reversals demonstrate how biopower can function indiscriminately, a consequence of its large, systematic character, while individuals – humans, dogs, and more – functioning in such a context can have difficulty matching themselves to the goals of the larger system.

Friction in biopolitical organisation is not confined to war. In this essay's area of focus, other fundamental cultural principles inform the events. For instance, the logic and value of purebred specialisation becomes violently crossed with the expendability of organic life, not just of dogs but of people, trees, and much more in the jungles of Vietnam. So-called purebred dog breeding – itself a form of biopower with friction appearing in realities like hip dysplasia and the like – ostensibly makes the animals more valuable (McHugh 66-67; Page 82-84). Yet, when that value is applied in the context of war, it can be – and in this case was – radically reversed. The dogs' talents exposed them to grave danger and then abandonment. Their status alternated between being vital elements of a biopower regime fighting against the communist North and being expendable equipment.

The situation is closely parallel to the fickle and sometimes arbitrary relationship between humans and other animals that prevails in contemporary Western cultures at large. It has been frequently observed for example that pets are revered, treated as well as, or sometimes better than, human children, while the unbelievable numbers of animals raised in horrible

conditions and then slaughtered for food daily continues to multiply.⁹ Animals are at once deeply loved and ever-increasingly, systematically brutalised. For instance, in her study of Welsh cob horses, Samantha Hurn shows that human ‘owners’ admire and identify with their horses strongly enough to wish to *be* them. She quotes one contact who says of his stud stallion, ‘What a life! I know what I’d want to come back as if I ever get reincarnated!’ (27). Yet, Hurn notes, ‘stallions kept for breeding purposes are, in the main, kept in a permanent state of isolation and housed in 12’ x 12’ loose boxes’ (27-28). Despite the fantasy of their desirable lives, then, these horses experience very difficult realities. Hurn remarks that ‘because horses are naturally herd animals, the practice of keeping stallions in solitary confinement causes significant stress, often resulting in the development of abnormal behavior conditions’ (28-29).

Likewise, in their analysis of animal experimentation and emotion, Beth Greenhough and Emma Roe discuss the contradictions perceived by people associated with the studies. On one hand, ‘For the scientific researcher, the animal is effectively a “black box”’ (Latour, 1993). On the other hand, ‘For the veterinary expert in animal welfare . . . the animal subject is a being to be cared for and with which there is communication’ (54). Both a measure of care and the black-box distancing techniques are seen as necessary for the experiments to function. These contradictory positions turn around the *use* of people’s no doubt real affections, affections refused by the researcher and intensified by the veterinary expert. The objectification and concern often seem simply irreconcilable. Similarly, farmers often also care intensely for the animals they raise to be killed and eaten. The work of Temple Grandin is particularly relevant to this issue. She has done much to alleviate livestock suffering, driven by her professed love for animals (e.g. *Animals in Translation*). Yet, because of the context in which she expresses her concern, her work arguably makes it easier to kill more animals.

With a parallelism that is not accidental but that instead typifies this particular operation of biopower, the likely fate of many of the nearly 4,000 American war dogs abandoned in Vietnam was to be eaten. Burnam explains that, outside of the roughly 200 dogs that were returned to the U.S., ‘the rest . . . were either euthanised or turned over to the South Vietnamese Army, which meant that most likely, according to Vietnamese cultural practices, the dogs could be slaughtered for food’ (viii).

Humans as Animals of War

The dogs present one case of a biopolitical regime that ensnares the human animal as well, infiltrating the day-to-day performance of life, one of the ways Foucault describes the operation of biopower (143). The alternation between being a feeling subject and becoming pure body (even meat) is one of the standard problems of warfare, and is a primary focus for instance of Vietnam veteran and author Tim O'Brien's celebrated story, 'The Things They Carried,' part of his larger novelistic series of linked stories in his book by the same name. In this title story, a soldier is killed while urinating as another member of his platoon, undertaking a much more dangerous job, emerges from his task unscathed, precisely inverting expectations. O'Brien's characters describe with a stunned and stuttering repetition their shock at seeing their compatriot and friend simply die; 'boom down,' they say again and again, as he took a bullet and collapsed. The dying character, Ted Lavender, has become pure weight, a blank, falling mass. O'Brien's central conceit in the story is to characterise the troops according to 'the things they carried,' describing them essentially as mules, as pack animals whose identities are reduced to the few personal objects they can carry along with their military loads. Those personal objects, standing in for individual identity, already evoke war's dehumanising character, and Lavender's death completes their shift from human to animal to sheer matter. Thus in death Lavender illustrates the far end of this spectrum of possibilities for soldiers who are, even while alive, radically displaced, having become appendages for a political system that has sent them far afield. The story shows how movement among these three categories – human, pack animal, dead meat – is shockingly easy, at the disposal of those in command and of unfortunate luck.

This category mobility reminds us that the enactment of agency and selfhood are highly situational, circumstantial. Although the dogma since the Enlightenment in the West ascribes agency only to humans, Chris Wilbert explains in his essay 'What is Doing the Killing?' that agency must in fact be assessed by attending to specifics of context: 'dividing lines between people, animals, and machines are actually more subject to negotiation and change across (and within) time-spaces.' Wilbert continues that, 'in differing ordering processes, animals or machines can be seen to gain and lose attributes, and conversely, people take on and lose attributes of machines and animals over time, across territories, and in different spatial contexts' (32).¹⁰

The entire historical episode of dogs in Vietnam bears out Wilbert's point. A specific further example is Burnam's surprising, but actually somewhat common, response to the boredom of one of his military jobs. After he had been badly injured in combat, he was reassigned to a much safer Japan to guard materials. With too much time and too little to do, he felt increasingly homesick for the 'mountain wilderness' of his home in Colorado, for the 'whispering aspen trees' and the 'Rocky Mountain streams' (86). In that place, Burnam imagines himself able to feel human and happy again, to be able to make decisions for his own benefit. Yet, these homesick feelings paradoxically drive Burnam to request a transfer back to the fighting in Vietnam. Burnam's enactment of agency in making this request serves to undermine his agency: he is quickly forced into a number of situations that he cannot control in Vietnam; he is moved around like so much war machinery, as his narrative details. Conversely, the dogs, who of course do not choose to go to war, nonetheless *do* demonstrate types of agency upon their arrival, like other animals in other settings. Such cases remind us of how complex and circumstantial the performance of agency can be.

The circumstances of war, with their extreme exigencies, accelerate these changes of status, sometimes flipping an animal or a person back and forth between or among categories very quickly. War therefore makes the changes themselves much more visible, more legible. The paradoxes of this category flexibility deepen when we note the highly specific, rigid methods of animal training. As Burnam discovered how to handle the dogs of war, he 'soon learned a basic rule for working with sentry dogs – don't befriend any other animal except for your assigned dog' (73). These truly intimate, one-to-one relationships maximised the success of the teams, and the more valuable the role of the team, the more crucial the discipline of committed one-to-one intimacy. But by intensifying the emotional bonds between a particular dog and a particular human, this discipline underscores the bitter irony that highly individualised lives and relationships would be forfeited under the directives of broad, category logic (dogs equal equipment, therefore they are to be left behind). In short: the paradoxes of biopower.

Super-agency and Trauma in War

Even more broadly, the scenario in Vietnam typifies modern geopolitics. As Young insists in the opening of her history of the war, ‘In the largest sense, the United States was in Vietnam as a crucial part of the enterprise of reorganising the post-World War II world according to the principles of liberal capitalism’ (ix). Animals have a crucial, if increasingly contested, role in that economic and political system, making them at once essential and expendable, as the dogs were in Vietnam. To put this point differently: since the dogs were important in Vietnam, they performed a key role in the larger geopolitical work of the war, underscoring their value and their fleeting but powerful agency. Indeed, the striking similarities between the position of the dogs in Vietnam and that of the human soldiers underscores how these hierarchies of power can function across the ostensible boundaries of species.¹¹

Burnam’s first-hand account accents these broader matters of cultural organisation. Describing a large combat mission, he notes that the ‘chopper formation in the air was quite a sight,’ leading him to have ‘a huge feeling of confidence and complete sense of power,’ inspiring his question, ‘*how could the lesser-armed NVA and VC possibly whip the Americans?*’ (161; original italics). This sense of power – a kind of super-agency – appears in many of the texts about Vietnam, from O’Brien to Michael Herr’s book *Dispatches* to the film *Apocalypse Now*. Burnam’s confidence, borne partly out of how warfare mobilises the products of whole economies, systems of production, and cultures, is undercut in his book not only by the account of the fight that follows the passage above, in which there are many American casualties (171), but more generally by our knowledge of the outcome of the Vietnam wars. The function of such power places individual humans and individual dogs into contexts where they briefly display a super-agency of great importance, before quickly casting them aside, making them useless or worse, disposable.¹² In other words, there is a gap between the idea of omnipotence and the realities of warfare; there is friction in the biopolitical machine, however powerful it is. Indeed, the very presence of astonishing visible power, like the sight of the chopper formation, makes failure and death even more surprising. In Burnam’s account, the shocks of these reversals elude a clear analysis, appearing instead primarily as his raw, direct emotions. He notes repeatedly how impossible it felt to describe his powerful feelings – about the war, about his lost comrades, about his abandoned dog Clipper.

This intensely felt tangle of emotion, common to the other soldiers interviewed in the film *War Dogs* and to many other veterans of war, reiterates the paradoxes of biopower. Introducing the book *Trauma*, Cathy Caruth shows how traumatic experience, in exceeding comprehension, demonstrates the limits of human knowledge. Soldiers and others who inhabit these trying positions, where matters of life and death play out quickly and often indiscriminately, are commonly understood to have a fundamental kind of understanding. But Caruth notes how that knowledge is frequently, as it seems for Burnam, overwhelming. In such contexts, human beings are positioned very similarly to other mortal animals, like dogs, underscoring not our differences but our shared condition of imperfect knowledge and vulnerability.

Conclusion

In Vietnam and in contemporary war more generally, place becomes space, subject becomes object, animal becomes equipment, and vice-versa. The movement from nuanced and particularised entity to abstraction is similar in each of these categorical transformations. And yet the dogs were *real* individuals who worked with individual humans, and they shared intense relationships in particular places. Burnam's book shows us this fact. For many reasons, these dogs of war should be better known for their roles in Vietnam and elsewhere, and the texts aiming to raise their profile succeed largely by giving a genuine, emotional, individualised perspective of the war and of the dog/human relationships. This essay has interpreted those powerful singular emotions by placing them in a broader biopolitical context, underscoring that we need to recognise both the particularity of narratives and their larger contexts in order to better understand them.

Although the stories of the war dogs in Vietnam end tragically, there are glimpses of alternative possibilities within them. The profound relationships across the boundaries of species offer a model for living with different forms of life, whether human or otherwise. The powerful human-dog bonds, the porous character of species differences, the value of individuals in larger, shaping contexts – all these realities can be thoughtfully engaged in scenarios other than those of traumatic armed conflict. That is, perhaps such cases can teach us how better to make the same

transition in our conduct toward powerful others – others in terms of nationality, politics, species – that Burnam made when he first began working with the dogs of war. As he became better informed and more practically adept, and his relationship with his first war dog began to flourish, Burnam writes, ‘My fear had been replaced with joy’ (74). This experience echoes Donna Haraway’s argument in *When Species Meet* for direct, embodied experience with nonhuman animals. The love and pleasure that result are genuine and ought not be dismissed. Indeed, they need to be taken *more* seriously as part of an effort to align larger cultural organisation with feelings of passion and compassion, as happened when the contradictions of U.S. war dog policy helped inspire the official legal change, signed into law in 2000. Since then, dogs have been eligible for adoption after they are released from the military (McCombs).

Notes

1. The author would like to thank the Director of Connelly Library at La Salle University, John Baky, for his assistance with materials in their Vietnam Special Collection.
2. See a similar discussion of Foucault in Ryan Hediger, Introduction, *Animals and War*, 14.
3. Defining ‘agency’ can seem either relatively simple or significantly complex. While I have cited a relatively simple definition, it bears within it significant complexity. What counts as ‘meaningful’? What counts as ‘actively authored’? See McFarland and Hediger, ‘Approaching the Agency of Other Animals’ for more on this issue.
4. Demonising or othering the enemy is common procedure in modern (and perhaps all) warfare. As Young reports in an especially clear example, an American Marine told a reporter, ‘The only thing they told us about the Viet Cong was they were gooks. They were to be killed’ (143). The extreme exigency of war reduces the function of biopower to its simplest form: categorise and then nourish or exterminate.

5. I have in mind Donna Haraway's sense of this term, as developed in *The Companion Species Manifesto* and *When Species Meet*. The case of war dogs underscores how otherwise satisfying conceptions of human and other animal relationships can be put to grim effect in the wrong context.
6. It is important that the emotional bond between dog and human here – 'love' – appears in the form of an embodied working partnership. As Sherryl Vint argues, it is precisely because animals and humans are both embodied that we are connected in our exposure to biopower: the 'political relevance of the body forces us to confront our continuity with other animals, and to rethink the nature of governance in a biopolitical era in which power acts upon bodies and forms subjects through this action.' That is, 'humans and animals alike are shaped and controlled by modes of biopower that designate ways of living and dying' (444). The importance of embodiment is also central to Greenhough and Roe's article on animal experimentation, as they note explicitly (49).
7. See especially Robert Tindol, Riitta-Marja Leinonen, and Paul Huebener.
8. Foucault recognises that, even though the modern exercise of power reaches into the daily activities of life, biopower does not have absolute control: 'It is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them' (143).
9. As reported by the Animal Studies Group, in 1998 twenty-eight animals were killed per second for food in the United Kingdom alone (1). Vasile Stănescu also notes, quoting a United Nations report, 'that over fifty-five billion land animals are raised and slaughtered every year worldwide for human consumption. This rate of slaughter already consumes thirty percent of the earth's entire land surface (approximately 3,433 billion hectares) and accounts for a staggering eighty percent of the total land utilised by humans' (14).
10. In her 2010 book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett likewise presses our understanding of agency. She argues that agency is not confined to humans and other animals; she believes even non-organic matter has a kind of agency in certain situations. She points to the powerful effects that minerals can have on the human body, for instance, if ingested either in excess or in too small an amount. In certain contexts, that is, the presence of a mineral can have huge effects, exerting a kind of agency.

11. The history of human labour in both the first and second industrial revolutions likewise applies systematic thinking across species lines. As Shukin observes in *Animal Capital*, Frederick Winslow Taylor's ideas for maximising industrial production depend upon ideas of animality that were applied to human beings. A labourer was to be understood as an 'intelligent gorilla' (88), and core innovations like Henry Ford's assembly line found their spark in animal disassembly lines, the abbatoirs which Ford toured (87).

12. Dogs are subject to such status changes in other contexts as well. Krithika Srinivasan shows in a study of the United Kingdom and India how dogs are protected as pets when they live in human homes, yet, when they stray, they are treated as pests. Place, in other words, is a huge factor in their treatment and value.

Works Cited.

- Alger, Janet M, and Steven F. Alger. 'Canine Soldiers, Mascots, and Stray Dogs in U.S. Wars: Ethical Considerations.' *Animals and War*. Ed. Ryan Hediger. Leiden: Brill, 2013. 77-104.
- Animal Studies Group, The. Introduction. *Killing Animals*. Ed. The Animal Studies Group. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2006. 1-9.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. Print.
- Burnam, John C. *Dog Tags of Courage: The Turmoil of War and the Rewards of Companionship*. Fort Bragg: Lost Coast, 2000.
- Caruth, Cathy. Introduction. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 3-12.
- Crist, Eileen. *Images of Animals: Anthropomorphism and Animal Mind*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999.

- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1978.
- Grandin, Temple, and Catherine Johnson. *Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2005.
- Greenhough, Beth, and Emma Roe. 'Ethics, Space, and Somatic Sensibilities: Comparing Relationships between Scientific Researchers and their Human and Animal Experimental Subjects.' *Environment and Planning D: Space and Society* 29.1 (2011): 47-66.
- Haraway, Donna. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, And Significant Otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Pear, 2003.
- . *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008.
- Hediger, Ryan. Introduction. *Animals and War*. Ed. Ryan Hediger. Leiden: Brill, 2013. 1-25.
- Hurn, Samantha. 'What's Love Got to Do With It? The Interplay of Sex and Gender in the Commercial Breeding of Welsh Cobs.' *Society and Animals* 16 (2008): 23-44.
- O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1990.
- McCombs, Phil. 'Dogs No Longer Forced to Die for U.S.' *The Star-Ledger*, 3 December 2000, Sunday, final edition, News, 32.
- McFarland, Sarah E., and Ryan Hediger. 'Approaching the Agency of Other Animals: An Introduction.' *Animals and Agency*. Eds. Sarah E. McFarland and Ryan Hediger. Leiden: Brill, 2009. 1-20.
- McHugh, Susan. *Dog*. London: Reaktion, 2004.
- Page, Jake. *Dogs: A Natural History*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.
- Philo, Chris, and Chris Wilbert. Introduction. *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations*. Eds. Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert. London: Routledge, 2000. 1-34.

- Shukin, Nicole. *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2009.
- Srinivasan, Krithika. 'The Biopolitics of Animal Being and Welfare: Dog Control and Care in the UK and India.' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38.1 (2013): 106-19.
- Stănescu, Vasile. "'Green' Eggs and Ham? The Myth of Sustainable Meat and the Danger of the Local.' *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 8.1/2 (2010): 8-32.
- Thierman, Stephen. 'Apparatuses of Animality: Foucault Goes to a Slaughterhouse.' *Foucault Studies* 9 (2010): 89-110.
- Vint, Sheryl. 'Animal Studies in the Era of Biopwer.' *Science Fiction Studies* 37 (2010): 444-55.
- War Dogs: America's Forgotten Heroes*. Dir. William Bison. Narr. Martin Sheen, GRB Entertainment. 1999. VHS.
- Wilbert, Chris. 'What is Doing the Killing? Animal Attacks, Man-Eaters, and Shifting Boundaries and Flows and Human-Animal Relations.' *Killing Animals*. Ed. The Animal Studies Group. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2006. 30-49.
- Young, Marilyn B. *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1991.